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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a brief but comprehensive overview of various issues pertaining to the use and origins of Black English. The purpose of the paper is to help educators understand Black English and celebrate this dialect in class while facilitating the acquisition of Standard English. It holds that Ebonics is a dialect of English with its own set of rules, and is not inferior to Standard English but merely different. Origins are uncertain, but contending theories assert that it is derivative of lower class southern white speech or that it is a creolization of English. (Contains 10 references.) (KFT)

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RESPECTING BLACK ENGLISH AS A STYLE OF DISCOURSE

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Respecting Black English As A Style of Discourse

Since the 1960s several major paradigms have been formulated to explain why many low-income students and students of color achieve low levels of academic success. One of these paradigms is the cultural deprivation paradigm. This theory suggests that low-income students do not achieve in school because of the culture of poverty in which they live. The culture deprivation theorists believe that characteristics such as poverty cause low income children to experience cultural deprivation and irreversible cognitive deficits. A second paradigm is the cultural difference paradigm. Cultural difference theorists reject the idea that low-income students have a deficit. Instead they believe that ethnic groups such as African Americans have rich diverse cultures which consists of values, perspectives, and languages that are different form the mainstream culture which schools subscribe to. It-is from this paradigm that multicultural educators strive to help people recognize the legitimacy of various dialects and its connection to one's culture (Banks, 1999).

Black English, or Ebonics, is one of the best known dialects spoken in the United States. It is estimated that approximately 80 percent of African Americans use Black English (Chinn & Gollnick, 1998). Nevertheless many African American are stigmatized educationally, professionally, and socially for using Black English. The purpose of this paper is to help educators understand Black English and celebrate this dialect in the class while facilitating the acquisition of Standard English.

Black English is considered by most linguists and African Americans as a legitimate system of communication. It is a systematic language rule system that is different than but not substandard to Standard English. Like any other language Black English is a well-ordered verbal system with grammatical structure and a vocabulary shared by many members of the Black community (Wilson, 1987). Although many linguists agree that Black English is a dialect, many disagree to its origin. One theory of origin is that all features which are said to be characteristic of Black English can be found in white speech, particularly in Southern white speech. Therefore most characteristics of Black English are derived historically from British-Isles or other white dialects. These characteristics have come to be interpreted as

"Black English" because people have immigrated from the south to the northern cities of the United States. Hence what were originally geographical differences have now become, in the north, ethnic-group differences. Furthermore racial segregation has meant that there has been minimal contact between Blacks and Whites. This minimal contact has led to the independent development of the English of both Blacks and Whites. The two varieties have generated their own distinct linguistic innovations (Trudgill, 1995).

The second view of the origin of Black English goes back to slavery. Adherents of this view believe that Black English reflects the early creolization of English by slaves (Pflaum, 1978). The term creole is applied to a pidgin language which has become the native language of a speech community and has therefore acquired all the functions and characteristics of a full natural language (Trudgill, 1995). In this view of the origin of Black English, slaves in the United States spoke a language similar to that spoken by slaves in the Surinam and in the Caribbean islands which reflected their West African origins. During slavery, slaves who worked in the plantation house began to modify their speech toward the British descendant English fairly quickly. Conversely the creolized form of English spoken by the field hands changed

more slowly. After slavery the language continued to change and became more like Standard English (Pflaum, 1978). Like the followers of the first view adherents of this view also acknowledge the similarity between Black English and Southern White speech, but they suggest that similarities between the speech of Blacks and southern Whites may be due to the influence of the former on the latter. In addition to similarities between Black English and Southern dialect there are similarities between the Black English dialect and Standard English. Standard English has borrowed words such as "jazz" and "voodoo" from the Black English lexicon. Also the common American use of "uh huh" to indicate affirmation is said to have originated from Black English (Trudgill, 1995). Regardless of which of the theories you adhere to, your beliefs concerning the origin of Black English will affect you view of Black English speakers.

There are four possible views one can take with respect to the controversy about the origins of Black English. The first view is "different equals inferior". Believers of this view maintain that there are no differences between the speech of black and white Americans. Therefore all characteristics of Black English are inferior to Standard English dialect and are a result of poor

education (Trudgill, 1995). Most linguists would not accept this view since it has been demonstrated to their satisfaction that Black English is a systematic rule system, but unfortunately many people, including some African Americans, believe the "different equal inferior" view. Some Blacks still feel that the academic discussion of Black English is an attempt to discriminate against them. They would prefer that the subject not be discussed. This is not totally surprising in view of the prejudices many people still have about language. This was seen clearly in the 1996 Oakland schools' controversial adoption of Black English in the curriculum.

The second view one can have is the "dialectologist" view. This view recognizes that there are differences between Black English dialect and Standard English dialect but like the "different equal inferior" view it claims that Black English is derived from British dialect. Therefore black speech and which speech were originally the same. The present differences that exist between the two speeches result from a different combination of British dialect features. For those who follow the dialectologist view, Black English has kept archaic features now lost in other dialects. Furthermore the color-system that has historically existed in the United States has help to "skew" the black speech. The

development of the urban ghetto and of barriers to communication imposed by poverty and deprivation has been instrumental in the development of differences (Trudgill, 1995).

The third view is the integrationist view. Adherents of this view recognize that historical evidence suggest that Blacks in America used to speak an African-influenced creole type of English, but there are no longer any features of Black English dialect which cannot be found in white speech. In other words, although there was formerly a difference, Black English dialect and some types of southern white speech are now indistinguishable (Trudgill, 1995).

The last view is the "creolist" view. It maintains that there are significant differences between Black English dialect and other dialects, and these differences can best be explained in terms of the creole origin theory. Adherents of this view believe that Black English is an English Creole like those spoken in the Caribbean and has gradually become more and more decreolized (Trudgill, 1995). Although not all linguists subscribe to the belief that Black English derived from a creole origin, many agree that Black English is a separate legitimate dialect spoken by many African

Americans especially lower socioeconomic children (Craig & Washington, 1998).

As an educator it is important to become aware of your feelings toward African American dialect and recognize how it affects the Black children in your classroom. Teacher bias against Black English is common among majority-group educators and among some African American educators as well. Although Black English is an ethnically related dialect, it is also a dialect related to social class. In a recent study researchers found that children from a lower socioeconomic background used Black English significantly more than children from a middle socioeconomic background (Craig & Washington, 1998). Dialects related to lower socioeconomic levels are usually stigmatized, and stereotypes are often associated with the speakers of those dialects. One common stereotype is the assumption that a non-standard dialect reflects a lower intelligence. This may be one reason why African American children are disproportionately represented in gifted and talented classes.

It is important to realize the arbitrariness of language acceptance. Although Standard English is often referred to in the literature, no single dialect can be identified as such. No particular

dialect is inherently and universally standard. The determination of what is and what is not standard is usually made by people or groups of people in positions of power. Therefore people seeking educational and occupational success tend to use the language identified and used by those in power. This language is known as Standard English dialect (Chinn & Gollnick, 1998). As educators we must teach our children the Standard English dialect in order to help them gain economic success. The question for many educators is how do we empower our students with Standard English dialect and celebrate the dialect they bring into the classroom?

Before answering the question I will discuss what educators should not do. Teachers must not spend their time relentlessly "correcting" children's English. Despite good intentions, constant correction seldom has the desired effect. In actuality correction increases cognitive monitoring of speech thereby making talking difficult. The result of this increase monitoring is usually silence. Students tend to say little in the classroom which can have negative effects on the quality of education they receive or the teacher's perception of their intelligence (Delpit, 1997).

Furthermore constant correction can raise what Stephen Krashen terms the affective filter. In Krashen's work on second-

language acquisition, he lists the following affective variables that relate to successful acquisition of a second language: low anxiety, high motivation, and high self-confidence (Krashen, 1991). Krashen hypothesized that the presence of these variables correlate with the success of acquiring a new language. When these affective conditions are not present or are not optimal the learner will develop a mental block, or filter. Although the process of acquiring a new dialect cannot be completely equated with acquiring a second language, some processes seem to be similar. The less stress attached to the process of acquiring another dialect, the more easily it will be accomplished.

Constant correction may also affect a student's attitude toward the teacher. The language form that a student brings to the classroom is closely related to his/her loved one, community, and personal identity; it is a significant part of the student's culture. If a teacher constantly corrects a student's language so that it might conform to Standard English, the student will begin to see the constant correction as a rejection of his/her culture. He/she might associate the teacher's correction as an implication that something is wrong with the student. This inevitably will lead to a student's poor attitude toward the teacher (Delpit, 1997).

Finally teachers should not insist that Standard English be used at all times in school. The truth is no one use Standard English all the time. The use of one dialect versus another depends on the given situation. Students must be taught that dialect use is connected to appropriateness. Certain situations, bot social and professional, may dictate adjustments in dialect, or code-switching. Students must be taught this skill. In possessing the skill to determine appropriateness and code-switch, an individual may have some distinct advantages and may be able to function and gain acceptance in more cultural contexts (Chinn & Gollnick, 1998).

The question still remains what can teachers do to help students acquire an additional oral form? First and foremost, teachers must recognize and acknowledge the legitimacy of the dialects brought to the classroom by the students. One way to this is to use literature that reflects the dialects in the class. At this suggestion I must offer a caveat: teachers should not use literature with the intent of "translating" the content into Standard English dialect. To do so will imply that the literary work must be "fixed". Instead the literature must be used to celebrate the beauty of the language. Students must be taught that some of the greatest writer

wrote fluently in both Standard English dialect and Black English dialect. Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "An Antebellum Sermon" is a great example of the beauty of Black English. This political sermon speaks of the hardships of slavery in the language that is familiar to his audience.

He writes:

> We is gathahed yeah, my brothahs,
> In dis howlin' wildaness,
> Fu' to speak some words of confo't
> To each othah in distress.
> An' we chooses fu' ouah sufjic'
> Dis-we'll 'splain it my an ' by'
> "Ab; de Lawd said, 'Moses, Moses'
> An' de man said, 'Hyeah am I," (Long & Collier, 1990, p. 220).

Later Dunbar wrote of the same subject manner in the poem "We Wear the Mask":

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myrial subtleties. (Long & Collier, 1990, p. 223)

Both poems are examples of a fluent, well-known, Black writer who wrote in Standard English dialect and Black English dialect. There are other examples in the works of Zora Neale Hurston for older students of bell hooks for younger students. Regardless of the age of the students, teachers can bring in literature that celebrated the variety of dialects spoken throughout.

Once teachers have acknowledged the legitimacy of various dialects they must try to make the study of language diversity a part of the curriculum for all students. One way of doing this is role-playing. Playing a role eliminates the possibility of implying that the child's language is inadequate. It allows the students to get a feel for speaking Standard English dialect while being free from the threat of correction. For younger children the teacher may allow them to role-play cartoon characters. Many "superheroes" speak in Standard English dialect. For older students the teacher may allow them to put on drama productions. Some teachers have their students take on the personae of a newscaster and produce a daily news show. Such techniques deflect the focus from the student's speech but rather suggest that different language forms are appropriate in different contexts (Delpit, 1997).

Finally teachers can acknowledge the unfair "discourse-stacking" that our stratified society engages in (Delpit, 1995). Teachers must openly discuss the injustices of success based not upon one's merit but upon the racial group one is born into or the language one uses. Once the teacher has provided a safe trusting environment in which authentic discussion can take place, then the student will begin to see the motivation for acquiring the dialect of economic and political power—Standard English.

In concluding this paper I would like to offer parent some recommendations for helping children acquire Standard English dialect while retaining pride in their Black English dialect. First parents must recognize that Black English is a legitimate dialect and not "bad" English. Hence parents should not permit their child to be criticized, degraded, or seen as mentally inferior because of his/her use of Black English. At the same time parents must recognize that in order for a child to successfully function economically in the dominant culture, he/she must become fluent speakers and writers in Standard English. Parents are the best ones to model the importance of becoming "bidialectal". Teach your child when it is appropriate to use the Standard English dialect and when it is appropriated to use Black English dialect. Help him/her

become comfortable with both discourses in order to succeed in all areas of life.

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